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Language, Power and Colonial Governance in Punjab: 1849–1947

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Abstract
From annexation in 1849 to the 1947 upheavals, colonial government had far-reaching consequences on Punjab's language and cultural life. Tracing the evolution of language policy reveals that measures framed as bureaucratic needs frequently had political motivations, defining who could speak with authority. The promotion of English and Urdu as progressive languages rendered Punjabi unfit for schooling or state labour, with serious ramifications for access to education, employment, and print culture. Nonetheless, colonial hierarchies created counter currents, as Punjabi scholars, reform groups, and literary organisations attempted to establish a Punjabi intellectual legacy that resisted imperial cultural logics. Reading state records with the growing Punjabi and Urdu print spheres places Punjab within larger discussions about imperial language regimes and postcolonial identity. This study demonstrates that language was a crucial arena of colonial authority and contestation, and its hierarchies continue to define political claims and identity forms in Punjab today.

INTRODUCTION

Language and power were inextricably linked in the operations of colonial rule, defining both governance and cultural identity across the empire. In Punjab, British language policy reshaped existing hierarchies by elevating some languages and marginalising others, changing who could speak authoritatively and on what terms. Punjabi, Persian, Urdu, and a variety of local languages were progressively arranged into a hierarchy that represented imperial notions of culture and administrative efficiency. Colonial scholars have shown how language surveys, census classifications, and educational reforms were used to regulate populations and produce docile subjects (Cohn, 1996; Viswanathan, 1989). These trends were particularly noticeable in Punjab, where the promotion of Urdu and English, as well as the systematic exclusion of Punjabi from schools and governmental agencies, reshaped the region's linguistic landscape and transferred cultural and political power. Prior to British conquest in 1849, Punjabi dominated ordinary speech, Persian functioned as the language of administration, and Urdu circulated mostly in literary and metropolitan circles. British rule altered the terrain by establishing Urdu as the language of lower administration and education, and English as the medium for higher education and elite government service. These judgements impacted access to school, employment, and public authority, establishing new linguistic hierarchies in the region's social structure (Rahman, 1996; Lelyveld, 1993). Colonial officials sometimes regarded Punjabi as lacking refinement or literary worth, basing their judgements on imperial conceptions of civilisation and progress rather than linguistic reality. In contrast, Urdu was portrayed as sophisticated and administratively appropriate, but English was positioned as the language of science, reason, and modernity (Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1998). This classification of languages reflected broader colonial notions that linked linguistic form to cultural and political value (Chatterjee, 1993; Dirks, 2001).

Despite being marginalised in schools and governmental agencies, Punjabi literary culture did not perish during colonial control. Reform movements like the Singh Sabha, as well as individual writers and nascent literary clubs, tried to establish Punjabi as a medium of intellectual and cultural exchange (Grewal, 1998; Oberoi, 1994). Figures such as Bhai Vir Singh and Nanak Singh used poetry and fiction to explore issues of identity, history, and spirituality, demonstrating that Punjabi writing could thrive even when official backing was denied (Shackle, 2003; Mandair, 2013). At the same time, Urdu and English print cultures grew fast due to official backing, missionary presses, and new educational networks, allowing newspapers and journals to flourish in towns like Lahore (Gilmartin, 1998; Orsini, 2002). Punjabi print expanded more slowly because to restricted funding and ongoing script debates (Gurmukhi, Shahmukhi, or Devanagari), which represented deeper religious and political conflicts within Punjabi society (Oberoi, 1994; King, 1994). The consequences of colonial language policy continue to impact disputes over education, identity, and cultural authority throughout the region. In Pakistan, Punjabi is the most widely spoken language but has no official status, whereas Urdu, which was promoted during colonial rule, continues to dominate governmental institutions (Ayres, 2009; Rahman, 2011). Punjabi is constitutionally recognised in Indian Punjab, yet English and Hindi continue to wield considerable institutional power, particularly in administration and higher education (Brass, 2005; Talbot, 2016). These patterns demonstrate how colonial hierarchies of language and knowledge were absorbed into new political orders rather than disappearing with independence. Examining Punjab's colonial history through archival records,

educational policies, and the emergence of print culture reveals that language was both a weapon of administration and a medium of resistance. Understanding this history reveals how linguistic validity, political claims, and identity constructions in Punjab are still being negotiated under colonial contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This study takes a qualitative, historical approach to examining how British colonial language policy affected linguistic hierarchy and literary production in Punjab between 1849 and 1947. The analysis combines archival research, historical discourse analysis, and close reading of literary texts to better understand how language functioned as both a weapon of governance and a channel of cultural negotiation. The fundamental evidence basis is made up of archival materials such as Punjab Government Proceedings, Punjab Education Department reports, missionary school records, colonial grammars, and early newspapers written in Lahore and Amritsar. These documents show how administrators argued and justified language policy, as well as how those judgements were carried out across schools, courts, and bureaucratic offices (Rahman, 2011; Lelyveld, 1993). Historical discourse analysis traces how colonial officials categorised and ranked languages, and how these descriptions influenced policy. This method builds on previous research demonstrating that language was critical in colonial settings for defining power, categorising populations, and legitimising political decisions (Blommaert, 2005; Cohn, 1996). Official depictions of Punjabi as "rustic" or "unsuitable" for formal settings, and Urdu and English as polished or modern, are interpreted as discursive constructions rather than neutral judgements. These stories reveal how language hierarchies were intentionally created and disseminated throughout the colonial state. The study also employs interpretive textual analysis of poetry, fiction, religious texts, and essays to better understand how Punjabi writers dealt with these hierarchies. This method emphasises how authors used language, genre, and narrative form to manage issues of identity, authority, and cultural belonging. The analysis is informed by postcolonial literary theory, especially Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's notion that writing in indigenous languages might constitute cultural resistance (1986) and Anderson's description of how print networks shape linguistic standardisation and literary communities (2006). These frameworks assist to place Punjabi literary output in the context of larger discussions about language, modernity, and political imagination. Using a variety of sources, including administrative records, newspapers, and literary works, the study can reconstruct both the official logic of colonial language policy and the cultural reactions. Working with colonial archives demands awareness of their limitations. Most administrative records reflect British officials' concerns and preconceptions rather than the linguistic realities of ordinary Punjabis, and missionary or educational publications frequently portray Punjabi culture through civilising or moralising lenses. Literary sources present unique challenges: many Punjabi works from the period exist only in scattered editions or partial print runs, making it difficult to capture the entire breadth of literary activity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that colonial language policy in Punjab was a planned restructuring of power rather than an administrative adjustment. The colonial state created a language hierarchy by promoting Urdu and English and banning Punjabi from schools, courts, and bureaucratic organisations. This hierarchy echoed broader imperial beliefs about civility, discipline, and modernity, and it was consistent with research that demonstrated how colonial governments utilised language to

classify populations and maintain power (Cohn, 1996; Pennycook, 1998). The adoption of Urdu as the primary language of lower administration in Punjab after 1849 followed North Indian bureaucratic precedent, but it also expressed a cultural preference: Urdu's established script, literary prestige, and association with elite urban culture allowed officials to frame it as inherently "refined" and administratively suitable (Kamran, 2008). In contrast, Punjabi was regularly disregarded in official correspondence as a rustic vernacular with little structure or literary depth, a verdict moulded more by colonial ideology than linguistic truth (Rahman, 2011; King, 1994). This misunderstanding concealed Punjabi's literary and oral traditions. Mir (2010) and others have demonstrated that Punjabi had a long history of devotional poetry, folk narratives, and religious texts that circulated widely in rural and urban populations. The colonial failure to accept these forms as "literature" demonstrates how linguistic hierarchies were built through selective valuation: genres connected with elite, Persianate, or urban cultures were exalted, while those rooted in local or oral traditions were marginalised. The outcomes were not only symbolic. The colonial state eliminated Punjabi from realms of formal authority by institutionalising Urdu in administration and schools, limiting Punjabi speakers' access to education, employment, and political influence. This moves reshaped social mobility by giving preference to individuals who could learn Urdu or English, hence reinforcing language inequality in governance systems. These trends were accelerated by English education. English, being the language of higher education, law, and elite administration, became the entry point for political and economic success. Missionary schools and government universities emphasised English as the language of intellectual development, creating a class of Punjabis whose social mobility hinged on their ability to handle the linguistic demands of the colonial state (Allender, 2006). However, the impacts of English were opposite. English-educated Punjabis adopted British literary and philosophical traditions and internalised colonial ideas regarding vernacular languages, leading to cultural dislocation. English education introduced pupils to worldwide debates on nationalism, liberalism, and anti-imperialism, resulting in the creation of political imaginaries that opposed colonial power (Viswanathan, 1989). Institutions supposed to develop loyal intermediates became centers for anti-colonial ideas.

The growth of Urdu print culture strengthened the linguistic hierarchy. Lahore rose to prominence as a center of Urdu journalism and literary creation, thanks to official patronage and commercial print networks. Newspapers like Paisa Akhbar and Zamindar provided forums for political commentary and literary experimentation, cementing Urdu's position as the language of urban public discourse (Gilmartin, 1998). These publications impacted the contours of the political imagination by deciding which voices and genres were considered legitimate contributions to public discourse. Punjabi, on the other hand, suffered structural challenges: the lack of state support, exclusion from official institutions, and fragmentation across Gurmukhi, Shahmukhi, and Devanagari scripts made it difficult to establish a cohesive reading audience (King, 1994; Oberoi, 1994). Script became a symbol of communal membership as Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu reform groups rallied around various linguistic forms (Brass, 2005; Rai, 2000). The colonial authority did not intentionally create these divisions, but its policies provided structural incentives for communities to politicise language, transforming linguistic difference into communal identity. These interactions highlight a basic paradox of colonial governance: the linguistic systems that reinforced imperial authority also produced the

intellectual tools and cultural forces that resisted it. The marginalisation of Punjabi prompted new vernacular activities, most notably the Singh Sabha movement, which promoted Gurmukhi, developed printing presses, and promoted Punjabi literacy (Grewal, 1998; Ballantyne, 2006). Modern Punjabi writers such as Bhai Vir Singh and Nanak Singh displayed the language's expressive capacity via works that probed spirituality, social transformation, and cultural memory, thus contradicting colonial assumptions about its insufficiency (Shackle, 2003; Mandair, 2013). These developments demonstrate that Punjabi literary culture did not merely survive colonial isolation; it adapts, reconfigures itself, and asserts new kinds of power.

Overall, the data indicate that colonial language policy in Punjab was a cultural and political enterprise with long-term repercussions. It changed literary output, redefined social mobility, and helped to communalise language identity. Its legacies are still present today. Punjabi retains an equivocal position in both India and Pakistan, revered as a cultural language yet also suppressed in state institutions. Understanding these historical dynamics helps to explain why language politics in South Asia are still hotly debated, and why conflicts over script, identity, and cultural authority continue to bear the weight of colonial past.

CONCLUSION

The colonial language policy in Punjab was not a neutral administrative decision. It developed a governance framework that outlasted the empire that established it. Schools, courts, and the revenue administration became places where selective linguistic recognition was normalised. These procedures eventually evolved into policy frameworks that outlined how authority could be gained and exercised. These frameworks proved extremely stiff. They left little room for revision once they were ingrained in institutional practice, even as political circumstances altered. Policies affecting education, legal process, and administrative classification continued to favour some language varieties while limiting others. Their survival was not due to deliberate preservation, but to the inertia of bureaucratic processes that had proven difficult to break. These limits are still fundamental to the region's political life. They limit the scope of linguistic claims that can be asserted and the types of recognition that the state is willing to offer. As a result, contemporary arguments take place inside frameworks established long before independence. The history of colonial Punjab demonstrates that these inequalities did not disappear with the empire's demise; they continue to define who can talk to the state and on what conditions.

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